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DR. ROOPER'S
Commencement-Sermon

BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY of Cambridge,

JUNE the 30th, 1728.

Printed by J. Sturges, Cambridge.

Dr. R. O. P. E. R. S.

Commencement Sermon

Before the

University of Cambridge



June 1853

Printed by J. Sturges, Cambridge.

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S E R M O N

PREACH'D before the
University of Cambridge,
In St. MARY'S Church,

ON
COMMENCEMENT SUNDAY

In the Morning,

JUNE the 30th, 1728.

*Publish'd at the Request of Mr. VICECHANCELLOR,
and other HEADS of COLLEGES.*

By J. ROPER, D. D.
AND
Late Fellow of St. JOHN'S College

L O N D O N :
Printed for WILLIAM INNYS, at the West
of St. Paul's Church-yard. MDCCLXXVIII.

SERMON

Preached by the

University of Cambridge

In St Mary's Church

on

COMMENCEMENT SUNDAY

In the Morning

June the 30th, 1718.

Printed by J. Sturges, Stationer, in Pall-mall.



By J. ROOPER, D.D.

Late Fellow of St John's College

LONDON:

Printed by W. Bland, Printer, at the Widow's Head, in Pall-mall.



To the REVEREND

Dr. **LAMBERT,**

Vicechancellor of the University
of **CAMBRIDGE,**

And Master of St. JOHN's College.

SIR,

I HAVE obey'd the Honourable
Commands I received for the
Publishing of this Sermon ; and
let my own Opinion, or the Opi-
nion of others into whose Hands
it shall fall, be what it will concerning this
Discourse, I cannot however think it decent
to make any Apology for obeying such Com-
mands : any more than I should think it de-
cent to suffer it to wait upon you, without ta-
king this Occasion to congratulate the Worthy

DEDICATION

Society, to which I owe so many Obligations, and in the present Prosperity of which, I have so sensible a Pleasure, upon the happy Choice which they have made of their new *Master*.

It has been the great Advantage of that Learned *Society* to be blessed with a Succession of many Wise and Excellent *Governors*, who have eminently distinguished themselves by the Care they have taken (the good Effects of which have indeed been very visible in the flourishing Condition of the *Society*, and in the long Catalogue of Great and Learned Men, who have been educated in it) to support that regular Discipline by their Authority, and to enforce it by their Example; which must ever be the chief Ornament and Merit of such Collegiate Bodies: And we have the great Pleasure to see this Succession continued in a Person, whose Qualifications for carrying on the antient good Order of the College are equal to any of his Predecessors; and who, I must take the Liberty to add, perhaps in one Instance, is really superior to most, or to any one of those who have gone before him, in a thorough Knowledge of the Estate and Revenues of the *Society*; [which, I presume, is no little Merit in a *Master* of a College; and especially of a College, where the Smalness of the Estate, and the Number

D E D I C A T I O N

of Persons to be maintained out of its necessity
 fairly called for so much good Economy. And
 I know, Sir, you esteem it your great
 Happiness, that the Providence of God has
 call'd you to this Station, at a Time, when
 the College cou'd never, from the Foundation
 of it, no, not in the Days of Mr. Ascham's,
 notwithstanding the high Commendations it
 then merited from him, boast of a greater
 Number of its Fellows, who by their Learning
 and Virtue are a real Ornament and Credit to
 it; and who therefore, as you reasonably pro-
 mise yourself, will be sure to concur readily
 with you, in encouraging all that good and use-
 ful Learning in the younger Students, in which
 several of themselves have made so remarkable
 a Proficiency; and especially, in taking great
 Care to fix upon their Minds a true Value for
 the Church of England, and a Zeal for its pre-
 sent Constitution; at a Time, when the Love of
 too many is waxed cold to it; and a firm Loyalty
 to His Majesty, and to His Royal Family, as
 the GREAT SUPPORT under God of the Church of
 England, and indeed of the whole Protestant
 Religion.

THESE, I know, Sir, as they are, and
 will be your own constant and unwearied En-
 deavours;

* See Ascham's *Epistles*, p. 291.

DEDICATION.

deavours; so it is a great Pleasure to you to think, that you are sure of the Concurrence of your Society, and a happy Harmony among yourselves, in the promoting of them.

MAY God grant Success to all your Endeavours, and to the Endeavours of all honest and good Men, who are labouring in so useful and excellent a Work: And may he grant to you in particular Length of Days, that you may long adorn that Station, to which your Merits have so justly raised you; and which will furnish you with so many welcome Opportunities of promoting Piety and Virtue, and Learning; in short, of promoting all the good and great Ends for which Collèges were founded, and which have been so well answered by YOUR OWN.

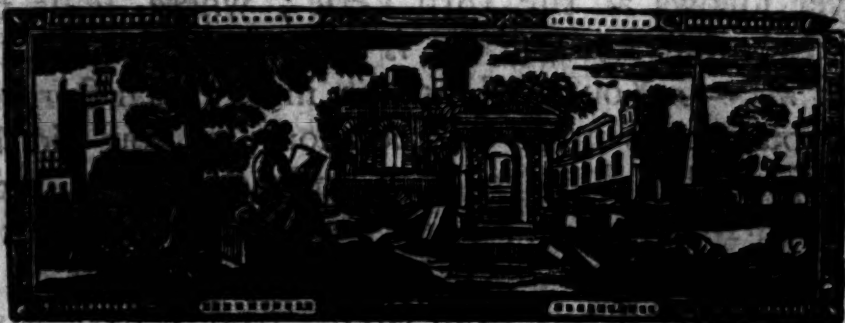
I am, with the greatest Respect,

SIR,

Your most Affectionate

Humble Servant,

J. ROPER.



St. JOHN VII. 17.

If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.



OR the immediate occasion of these words, we must go back to the 14th Verse; where we are told, that *about the midst of the Feast*, (of the Feast of Tabernacles, which the Jews were then celebrating,) *Jesus went up to the Temple, and taught*; i. e. expounded the Scriptures to the numerous concourse of People, brought together to Jerusalem at that solemn Festival. The Jews were greatly surprized at his Doctrine, and marvelled, saying, *How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?*

B

having

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having never been educated in the Schools of any of the Doctors or Professors of the Law. The Answer follows at the 16th Verse; where Jesus tells them, that *my Doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me.*—You need not be in so much Surprise, as you express upon this occasion; if you did but consider that I have been instructed by a much greater Master than any of your Doctors or Scribes; for, the Doctrine which I now deliver to you, I received immediately from God: And I have given you so clear and certain Evidence of my being a Prophet sent from God, and consequently of the Authority which I have to give you these Instructions, that it cannot be from any Defect in the Nature of the Evidence, that you do not receive me as a Prophet: Your Infidelity must be resolved into other Causes, than want of Evidence; for you have all the Evidence that you can possibly require, all the Evidence that the Nature of the thing is really capable of; and you yourselves would presently submit to it as sufficient, if you could be prevailed upon to practise the Doctrines which I teach you: but till that is done, —the Purity and Excellency of my Doctrines are no Signatures of their divine Original; Prophecies, tho' compleated in their fullest Latitude, are no Testimonies of my Mission; Miracles are no Arguments of it: But if any man will do the will of my Father, he shall know of the doctrine:—then these proofs will have their due weight, and he will soon be able to determine this Question, *whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.*

In discoursing upon these words, my business will be to shew,

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I. IN the first place, That a sincere Desire to practise the Duties of Religion, is a necessary Qualification for those who would examine into the Grounds and Evidences of it.

II. SECONDLY, I shall take notice of one or two Difficulties, with which the Doctrine I shall deliver under this Head may be supposed to be attended. And,

III. LASTLY, Draw two or three Inferences from the whole; and so conclude.

I. I AM to shew, That a sincere Desire to practise the Duties of Religion, is a necessary Qualification for those who would examine into the Grounds and Evidences of it.

AND that

I. FIRST, As it will dispose the Person who engages in such an Enquiry, to set about it with care and diligence.

THE greater our Ambition is to make ourselves acquainted with any Science, tho' it should be purely speculative, the greater will be our Affiduity and Diligence in the Prosecution of it: And then certainly, when the Science is of such a Nature, that our Enquiries into it must be made purely in regard to Practice; in such a Science, the Application we give to it, and the Improvements we make in it, must bear a Proportion to the Resolutions we have

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taken, of making the Result of those Enquiries the Rule of our Actions. A Person who sits down to make an Enquiry, whether such or such a Book contains a Revelation of the Will of God, with a firm Resolution to make it the Rule of his Actions; if it appears to be so upon the Issue of this Enquiry, is certainly in much less Danger in mistaking the Evidence there is for the Authority of such a Book; and will use greater Care and Diligence in searching into the sacred Truths contained in it, than one who has no such View in his Enquiries, and only enters upon them as a Matter of Curiosity, or mere Speculation only. The one considers the Enquiry he is upon, as a Matter of the greatest Moment and Importance; as it must be to him, when all his Actions are to be directed according to the Judgment he shall pass upon it; and when the Subject in question is no less than an Examination of the Title, which is offered to him, upon the Condition of his Obedience here, of eternal Happiness hereafter. And therefore he will be sure to proceed with great Caution, in enquiring into the Truth and Circumstances of every Relation with which this Revelation pretends to be supported; in examining into the Strength of every Argument, and giving them all their due and proper Weight. He will chuse to begin with the plain and certain Proofs which shall be offered in behalf of this Religion in general, and consider what Force there is in the clear Evidence united together in behalf of it, before he proceeds to amuse himself with Difficulties and Obscurities in some of the particular Doctrines contained in it. In short, he will be *cautious* without *Scepticism*, and examine things freely, without shewing an Inclination to be more pleased with *Doubts* than *Certainties*.

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tainties. Whereas the other, who considers such an Enquiry as a mere Amusement, or as a Subject he chuses to dispute upon, will be apt to be very superficial in examining into the Evidences of such a Revelation, and to be carried away by every little Prejudice against the Certainty of it: He will be immediately hurried on by the Vanity of shewing his Parts, to be trying them upon the obscure and difficult Parts of Religion, as affording the greatest room for Controversy, before he has rightly fixed upon his Mind the clear and certain Evidences of it.

If the one were to consider, for Instance, the particular Argument of Prophecy in respect to this Revelation, how far the Predictions of the Old Testament were fulfilled in him; whom we call the Messiah, and consequently what Sort of Proof they are for the Truth of his Mission; he would certainly begin with enquiring into the Nature of *prophetick* Language in general, the particular Genius of the *Eastern*; he would go on to consider the gradual Revelation of the Scheme of Prophecy from its first opening to the Conclusion of it; the Number of plain, direct, and literal Prophecies which are applied to him, and the entire Unity and Harmony of the whole Design: And until he had thus compared the whole System of Prophecy together, he would not think himself qualified to form his Judgment concerning the Nature of the Evidence of it. Whereas the other would content himself perhaps with obscuring and perplexing the Sense of a few typical Prophecies, and making his Reflections upon some Passages of the Old Testament, which are only accommodated to the Messiah in the New. His

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next Employment perhaps might be to collect a few unguarded Expressions of learned Men, who from different Views had taken different Methods of expounding some particular Prophecies; and after he had plac'd their Opinions one against another in a ridiculous Light, and put them into a Book, he would gravely call this partial View of the Argument, a full Consideration of the Evidence there is for Christianity, as it stands upon the Foot of Prophecy. With such slight and superficial Accounts of things some Men may take up, who have nothing further to do with Religion than to dispute about it. And when the Enquiry is made with so much Supineness and Indifferency, it is no wonder that it ends, as we commonly see it does, in Scepticism and Infidelity.

BUT then, *Secondly*, An Enquiry which is made into the Evidences of Religion upon a firm Resolution of practising the Duties of it, will not only be made with great Care and Diligence, but is likewise sure to be attended with that Modesty and Humility, which will put the Mind into the best Situation for receiving the Evidence of it. For tho' the Truth of Christianity is capable of the clearest and plainest Proof, and such as is the most obvious to the common Capacities of Men; yet the plainest, clearest, and most obvious Evidence will never be able to make its Impression, if the Mind is in no Disposition to receive it. The Evidences of Religion are sufficient to a sober and reasonable Man; yet so long as they are proposed to moral, and not to necessary Agents, they may be rejected by a scornful and conceited Man.

MIRACLES,

MIRACLES, singly considered, are the surest Proof that can be given of any Revelation; and when there is once sufficient Evidence that a Revelation is supported by Miracles, that Revelation, as it has all the Marks of Certainty that can be requir'd, so it is sufficiently proved, or no Revelation can be proved, to the Conviction of all reasonable and cautious Men. Nor will the Obscurity, or ambiguous Sense, of some Prophecies affect this Argument: For let it be observed as *acutely* as it will, that Miracles will never prove a thing to be true, which is false; yet certainly it is as *judiciously* observed, that where the Question is concerning the Meaning of a Prophecy, which, according to the very Letter of it, is capable of more Senses than one, that the Attestation of Miracles will surely prove that Sense to be the true one, as long as there is no Absurdity in understanding the Words, in that Sense, in which it is applied by the Person who has the Power of working them *. And certainly when the Affirmative of any Question is once sufficiently proved, Difficulties and Objections must fall on course; for they prove nothing here, but the Malice or Ignorance of those who make them; and are of equal Importance to support the Negative, whether we are able to resolve them upon any Principles of Reason, or not. Here then the honest and sincere Enquirer into the Certainty of Revelation will steadily and immoveably fix himself, and not indulge an unreasonable Humour of cavilling at a Truth, that is already proved by sufficient Evidence; because he cannot clear it of every Difficulty, which, at this Distance of Time, from our

* See Dr. Rogers's most excellent Sermons lately publish'd.

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Ignorance of the *Jewish* Language, their Customs, their Manner of Writing and Arguing, may possibly be urged against it.

BUT what if Persons, when they come to enquire into the Truth of Christianity, instead of being seriously employ'd, as the Importance of the Subject certainly requires of them, in considering with gravity and diligence the goodness, the number, the greatness of the Miracles with which it pretends to be supported, the power by which they must be wrought, and the unquestionable authority with which the credit of them is established and confirmed to all future Ages of the Church ; If instead of adding to this Evidence of Miracles the Testimony of clear, immediate, and literal Prophecies which speak of the *Messias*, and comparing and laying together with what entire harmony and full consent *these* divine Predictions receive their completion in him ; If instead of considering the lustre of his example, the innocence and sanctity of his life, the wisdom, nature, and tendency of his doctrines, the universal good the world has receiv'd by them, and the miraculous propagation of them : What if Persons, I say, instead of laying all these Evidences together, which are certainly sufficient to attest the Truth of Christianity to every sober honest Man, will be entirely busied either in treating Miracles themselves with great profaneness and scurrility, or in gleaning of difficulties from the obscure part of Prophecies, whilst at the same time they are studiously neglecting all the Evidence arising from clearer Prophecies, and catching at every idle pretence and frivolous exception that learned or unlearned Men have put into their hands ; why,
as

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as they plainly betray a disposition of mind by no means fit to receive the Evidences of Christianity, so it is no wonder if they shall wander on in an eternal circle of disbelieving and doubting concerning it.

THE Pharisees in our Saviour's Time, notwithstanding the many Miracles he wrought publicly among the People, were yet frequently asking Signs of him; and not satisfy'd with the greatest Evidence that could be given, they wanted still further Evidence: They wanted one *Miracle*, to authorize another *Miracle*. But how were they treated by our blessed Saviour himself? Why, as Evidence was not the thing they sought after, he usually answers them in such a manner, as rather to silence and reprove their Obstinacy, than inform and enlighten their Understandings. For tho' he ever rewarded an humble and teachable Spirit with Instruction; yet, as it was nothing but Justice, he was sure to leave a disputing, contradicting, unbelieving Spirit, in the midst of that Darkness and Error, with which it is usually surrounded.

BUT then, *Thirdly*, As a Person who enquires into the Truth of a Revelation with a full Resolution to practise the Duties of it, will not suffer his Judgment to be perverted by Pride and Vanity, much less will he suffer it to be corrupted with Lust and Sensuality.

For, as the whole End of his Enquiry into the Will of God, is to practise it with Care and Attention, so he is sure to sacrifice every Interest, and every Vice which he should discover to prejudice his Judgment concerning it. He enters

C

upon

upon his Enquiries after Moral and Practical Truth, with the same Indifference and Impartiality, with which Men enter into their Enquiries after Speculative Truths; and stands as ready to receive any Doctrine, or practise any Duty, when a sufficient Evidence is offered him for the one, or a sufficient Authority for the other; as a Philosopher can be to yield his Assent to any Discovery in natural Knowledge that is sufficiently demonstrated to him.

AND certainly, when Men are virtuous and honest enough to pursue Evidence where-ever it leads them, who have no Lust or Vices to gratify, which may awaken their Industry to search out Arguments whereby they may be able to soften the Rigour of such a Duty, or quite disallow and cancel the Obligations of another;—Persons, I say, who have thus silenced every Lust and every Passion from speaking in behalf of Infidelity, and have brought themselves to this happy Indifference in their Enquiries after religious Truth, will not miscarry in their Attainment of it; but as they have nothing to check them in their Pursuits after Wisdom, so they will have Evidence and Light enough to carry them safely to the End of that Knowledge which they are aiming after. But, on the contrary, when Persons, by a long habitual Course of Folly and Wickedness have quite broke the Force of their Minds, and are entirely brought under the Tyranny of their Lusts and Passions; they are in no degree qualified for being competent Judges of divine Truth, but will be sure to oppose the Religion that opposes them. And whilst they are under this strong Inclination from their Vices to make the most of every

Tri-

Trifle which they can any where meet with against Religion, it is no wonder, that to Men held under the Power of such Prejudices, the darkeſt Glimpſe of a Proof brightens into the cleareſt Evidence, and the weakeſt and moſt puzzled Argument grows up into the ſtrongeſt and plaineſt Demonſtration. Every Luſt is a ſeparate Argument for Infidelity; and will plead with greater Strength and Force againſt Religion, than the Purity and Excellency of its Doctrines, the Goodneſs and Greatneſs of its Miracles, the Unity and Harmony of its Prophecies, can poſſibly plead in its behalf.

For tho' it muſt be owned, that where-ever there is a clear and diſtinct Perception of the Agreement or Diſagreement of our Ideas, there the Mind muſt give its Aſſent or Diſſent accordingly: yet it muſt be owned at the ſame time, that we have it in our Power, by a certain Habit of Levity and Careleſſneſs, by a reſolute Inattention, to guard our Aſſent even againſt the Evidences of the cleareſt Truths. And would not Men, who are under ſo violent a Temptation to do it, make uſe of this Power which they have as Moral Agents to intercept that Light which would diſcover, and at the ſame time reprove their Vices and Follies, and ſhew them to be loſt and miſerable Men, if they continued in the Purſuit of them?

CARE therefore muſt be taken, if we will be right in our Judgments concerning thoſe Doctrines which Chriſtianity teaches; that we be right in our Lives, as to thoſe Duties which it commands; that there be no lurking Sin, no Boſom-Infirmity, which may prevent the Grace of God from working upon us.

FOR, in the *Third* place, besides the natural Advantages of Care and Diligence, Modesty and Humility, Sincerity and Probity, Qualities which must be of great Service towards the Attainment of Knowledge of any Kind; and much more towards the certain Attainment of religious Knowledge; all sincere and good Men have the particular Promises of God's Holy Spirit, to guide and direct them to the Knowledge of his Will, and to imprint upon their Minds the sure and strong Evidences of it.

THE *natural Man*, says the Apostle *, *receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned; but he that is spiritual, judgeth, discerneth all things.* The *natural Man* will have his Understanding so darkned and obscured by his Vices, and is under so many strong Impediments that obstruct him in his Enquiry after Truth, that he will be sure to quarrel with, and to disallow of those Evidences of Religion, be they ever so forcible and plain, that require him to renounce his favourite Sins, and would oblige him to enter into a Way and Rule of Life perfectly new and strange to him. But the *spiritual Man*, the *Man* who enquires into the Will of God with Probity and Sincerity, who searches the Scriptures with his Heart and Affections, as well as his Understanding; and is resolved to obey and follow with the one, whatsoever he shall discover to be true with the other; and who, besides these natural Advantages so serviceable in an Enquiry of this Nature, is likewise sure to have his Endeavours after Knowledge accompanied with the supernatural Assistance of the holy Spirit of God: A Man so dis-

* 1 Cor. ii. 14, 15:

posed by *Nature* to find out Truth, and so blessed and assisted by *Grace*; so good, so virtuous, so spiritual a Man will be able to discern Truth from Error; he will be able to discern betwixt the clear and indisputable Evidence, there is for the Truth of Christianity in general, and some Obscurities in the particular Doctrines of it; he will be able to discern betwixt *Certainties* and *Difficulties*; and will not be so weak and absurd, as to give up the one for the Sake of the other. In short, he will be able to discern all things, all things necessary for him to discern. For such is the Goodness of God to him, that tho' he may not be exempted from lesser Errors, yet he has the Promises of his Assistance to lead him into all Truth necessary to his Salvation.

Which brings me, in the *Second* place, to take notice of the Difficulties with which the Doctrine I have delivered under this Head may be supposed to be attended?

For here perhaps it will be said, Is the Origin then of all Infidelity to be resolv'd into the Vices and Follies of Men? Must we be so rash and uncharitable, as to arraign every Unbeliever for a wicked Man? as, on the contrary, must we make such an unreasonable Compliment to the Understanding of virtuous Men, as to affirm, that every good Man, who enquires into the Will of God with Care and Sincerity, will be able not only to discover the Evidences of the Gospel, and submit to the Truth of it in general, but likewise will be sure of arriving at such a particular Measure of Knowledge in it, as shall be sufficient for his Salvation?

Do not such extravagant Assertions betray great Excess of Severity on the one hand, of Charity on the other, and of Partiality on both?

To the first we answer, That this is the *Scripture* Account of Infidelity ; nor do we apprehend that the Doctrine in *Reason* is chargeable with any uncharitable Consequences that can be drawn from it. For if the Truth of the Gospel is supported by clear and sufficient Evidence ; and indeed if God Almighty has been pleased to give a Revelation of his Will to Men, it would be the greatest Absurdity to suppose, either that he has not given a sufficient Evidence of this Revelation, or that the Articles contained in it, which all Men are concerned principally to know, should not be plain and intelligible to all Men : If the Gospel therefore, I say, is proposed with such sufficient Evidence, that every honest and impartial Enquirer into the Truth of it, upon a serious and fair Examination into its Proofs, may acquire an indubitable Certainty of it ; then it certainly follows, that where-ever an Assent is not *so* given to this Evidence, that the Cause of the Infidelity is not owing to the Want of Evidence, or to any Imperfection in the Nature of it. And if there is no Fault in the Evidence, then into what other Cause, I pray, can it possibly be resolved, but into the Temper and Disposition of the Person to whom it was proposed ?

THERE is no middle Way to be taken ; the Fault must certainly either be in the Evidence, or the Enquirer : The one must either be insufficient, or the other an unqualified Judge of it. — And if we are sure that the Evidence of the Gospel is of so clear and certain a nature, that there can be no reasonable Ground of disbelieving or doubting concerning it ; then the Consequence is clear enough, that every Disbeliever must have his Infidelity charged upon his Vices and his Passions, which di-

vert him either from attending to this Evidence, or will not suffer him to acknowledge the Force of it.

THIS is the *Scripture*, this is the *rational*, Account of Infidelity. For thus it is written in this very Chapter, that * *the world hated the Messiah, because he testified of it, that the works thereof were evil.* And again; † *No man spake openly of him, for fear of the Jews;* i. e. No Man durst own his prophetick Character, from a Love of this World, or from a criminal Cowardice.

AND if *Scripture* were silent in this Matter, *Reason* alone, as I observed before, would support us in this Charge we bring against the Infidel; and he must be content to bear with the Reproaches of it, let it appear ever so severe; and tho' his Pretensions are quite destroyed by it, of resolving his Disbelief of the Gospel into the more than ordinary Penetration of his Judgment.—For, in short, it is as evident as *Reason* can make it, that if the Truths of Religion are equally and sufficiently evidenc'd to all to whom they are propos'd, and if they are rejected by some and received by others, tho' there is no Difference in the Evidence; that then the Difference must certainly be in the Men, according as they are prepared by Virtue and Probity to receive, or corrupted it by Vice and Sensuality, to reject this Evidence that is offer'd in behalf of the Truth and Certainty of it.

BUT then, *Secondly*, Must not only Infidelity be resolved into the Vices and Follies of Men, as the constant Source of it? but likewise must we go on

* Ver. 7.

† Ver. 13.

to say, that every good Man, who enquires into the Will of God with Care and Sincerity, will be able not only to discern the Evidences of the Gospel, but likewise will be secure of arriving at such a Measure of Knowledge in it, as shall be sufficient for his Salvation?

AND here I must observe, that it is not suppos'd, but that—with the most honest and sincere Disposition to know the Will of God, a Christian, thro' human Frailties, or early Prejudices, or for want of Abilities, may possibly fall into, and continue in, great Mistakes, in regard to some of the particular Doctrines which God hath revealed in the Scriptures: For, *there is no degree of Virtue sufficient to render Man infallible.* But then, tho' the best of Men are not secure of an Exemption from Mistakes in Matters of Religion, yet we have no Difficulty in asserting, that every good and honest Christian, who uses his best and utmost Endeavours, with great Sincerity, to know the Will of God in every Particular of his Duty, is not only in the surest and readiest Way, from the very Nature of that Care and Diligence which he employs in the Use of all such Means as God has appointed for his Instruction, to attain to a sufficient Knowledge of the Doctrines of Christianity; but likewise, from the Goodness and Mercy of God will be secured from all such Errors, as shall endanger his Salvation; or however, not be deprived of it for his invincible Ignorance of them.

FOR invincible Ignorance cannot, or at least ought not to be the Subject of Punishment with any Legislator—much less with a just and good God, who can never be supposed so cruel and arbitrary, as to inflict eternal Punishment upon an honest and good Man, who was sincerely desirous to be instructed in the Principles of Religion, and in Consequence thereof to do the

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the Will of God, for such Errors as with the utmost Care and Diligence, and after the Use of all the Assistances God has appointed for his Instruction, he could not either discover to be Errors, or however not discover to be Errors condemned by that *Scripture* which he has made the only Rule of his *Faith* and *Manners*.

THUS I have gone through what I propos'd to speak to. I shall draw an Inference or two from the whole, and so conclude.

AND in the first place, As we are able to discover the Source of Infidelity, and evidently find it to arise from the Lusts and Passions of Men, which either cast such a Bias upon their Wills, as diverts them from attending to, or such a Suffusion over the Eye of their Understandings, as quite prevents them from discerning, the Light and Evidence of the Gospel; so we may certainly learn from hence not to be stagger'd in our Faith at the present Growth and Prevalence of it; nor in the least to suspect as if all were not right in the Business of Religion, because we happen to live in an Age which abounds with those who with great Scorn and Contempt reject the Evidences of it.

FOR, tho' it is very lamentable to observe, that Infidelity makes only too great an Appearance in the World, both for the Number and Quality of its Profelytes; and, to its greater Reproach, in an Age which has produc'd so many excellent and unanswerable *Apologies* for the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Religion; yet why should this shake the Faith, and move the Constancy of good and serious Men? Move their Pity and Compassion it certainly must; since the Prevalence of it is not owing to any *new* Evidence that is offered by its Advocates in its behalf, or to any *modern* Discoveries that have been made of the Weakness of any

28 *A Sermon preach'd at St. Mary's Church*

of the Arguments by which Christianity has all along been supported: It is no such Matter—but is all to be accounted for from the old Original Cause of Infidelity, the great Wickedness and Impiety of Men; which either will not suffer them to fix their Attention to, or quite perverts their Judgment concerning the Evidences of Religion.

THIS was the Cause why the Gospel was rejected by so many of the *Jews*, when it was first proposed to them: For tho' they were Eye-witnesses of the miraculous Works which our Saviour perform'd amongst them; yet what Effect did this visible Power of working Miracles *then* produce? which perhaps at *present* every Infidel would be ready to own he should certainly submit to: why even Miracles themselves could not force an Assent, where the Lusts and Vices of Men had guarded their Minds against it.—And the same will be the Cause of Infidelity wherever it does prevail, (of all the Infidelity of this, or any other Age) that Men ** love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil.*—For † *if the Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost; in whom the god of this world has so blinded the minds of them, which believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the Image of God, should shine unto them.*

BUT then, Secondly, If a sincere Resolution to practise the Duties of Religion be so necessary a Qualification for all those who wou'd examine into the Grounds and Evidences of it, then certainly it is the Duty of every Person, who pretends to engage in such an Enquiry, to take especial Care that he sets out right at the first, and that he begins his Enquiries into the Will of God with the Practice of such Duties, as upon the Principles of Reason he

** John iii. 19.*

† 2 Cor. iv. 3, 4.

may

may certainly know to be his Will, God, and universal Benevolence to Men; Probity, Chastity and Temperance, the Duties of Natural Religion, and which therefore are allowed by all Hands to be the Will of God, be the constant inseparable Companions of every sober Enquirer in the Truth of Revealed Religion. And if Persons come thus honestly prepared to examine into the Cause of Christianity, as the Evidence for it is certainly sufficient, their Decisions will unquestionably end in Favour of it: Nay, so pious and virtuous a Resolution will not only enable them to discern the Evidences of the Gospel, and submit to the Truth of Christianity in general; but likewise secure them of arriving at such a Measure of Knowledge in the particular Duties of it, as shall be sufficient for, and exempt them from falling into, or at least continuing in, all such Errors as will be destructive, of their Salvation. For if Men are ready above all things to practise as much as they know of the Will of God, this is not only the readiest way, from the natural Tendency of the thing, for them to know more of it; but likewise the *God* of all *Grace* and *Mercy*, who commissioned our Saviour as a *Prophet*, tho' he himself was very *God*, and had in him all the Treasures of *Knowledge* and *Wisdom* to deliver his *Will* and *Mind* to the World, will assist their Endeavours to know his Will with the supernatural Graces of his holy Spirit. And if he, who is *Wisdom* itself, instructs them; if *the God of all Truth* enlightens their Minds, they need not fear but they shall arrive at such a Measure of Knowledge of their Duty in this World, as will be sufficient for their Salvation in the next.

I just observe, *Lastly*, That if it is the Duty of all Persons, who would enquire into the Evidence of Religion, to accompany all their Enquiries of this Nature with a serious Resolution to practise the Duties of it; then certainly this, in a particular manner, becomes the Duty
of

...ed to instruct others in *this Word* of
all their Actions, that their Conduct is
Principles of this Religion; and that their
...ably answerable to their holy Profession. And
...living as it becomes those who have the *Oracles*
...committed to their Care, the Ministers of the
Gospel certainly become the most powerful Advocates for
the Truth and Certainty of it; and their Arguments in
Defence of Christianity will carry greater Force and Weight
along with them, when they come recommended by the
Examples of those who are employed in the Management
of them. They will be much more able to *dispute*, if
they take care to *live*, Infidelity out of the World: Nay,
their good Works may prove perhaps the blessed Instru-
ments of bringing some to own the *Faith* of *Christ*, whom
all the Force of Reasoning and Power of Eloquence would
have made no Impression upon.

It is certainly therefore, I say, in a particular manner
the Duty of those who are called to minister in holy
things, and to preach that Gospel of *Christ* to others,
which he received from his *Father*; to have constantly be-
fore their Eyes the Example of their blessed Saviour, who
as he came to instruct us in, so he himself obeyed in all
things the Will of his heavenly Father; and as he informs
us in the Verse before the Text, the *Doctrine which he*
taught was not his own, but the Doctrine of his Father,
whose Embassador he was, i. e. as a *Prophet*, he did not
substitute instead of the Orders and Instructions he received
from his *Father*, his own Designs, and the Imaginations
of his own Heart; so we should take especial Care, that
the *Doctrine which we teach be not our own*, be not the Do-
ctrine of our own Passions and Inventions; be not the Do-
ctrine of Ambition or Cowardise; be not the *Doctrine of*
Men, but the entire and pure Doctrine of that Gospel,
without any Addition to, or Diminution from it, which,
as a *Prophet*, he came from God to deliver to us.

F I N I S.

